

Students lead the way

By [JANUARY WETZEL](#)

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Before Peter Duncan had even heard of Project Lead the Way, he thought he might be interested in a career in communications.

Now, that's all changed.

Duncan, an eighth-grade student at Seymour Middle School, is one of the first students to take the new pre-engineering and technology program now offered at the school.

"I'm thinking maybe architecture, engineering or something along that line," Duncan said while designing a project using Inventor computer software. "Once I got into this, I knew I was going to like it."

Duncan isn't the only one impressed with the curriculum, which includes design and modeling as well as robotics and automation.

A group of local business leaders recently toured the school's Project Lead the Way lab for a first-hand look at how the program will benefit students and the future work force as well as local businesses.

David Beatty, human resources manager for Dicksons, a producer of inspirational gifts located at Freeman Field Industrial Park, sat with eighth-grader Alex Baughman and watched as she designed three-dimensional objects on the computer.

"It's excellent for the school to get students involved much earlier in using this kind of technology," Beatty said.

At Dicksons, Beatty said, the company employs a graphic artist and graphic designer to develop products.

"This gets them introduced to these areas and opens them up to job opportunities," he said of Project Lead the Way. "It's just amazing."

Teacher Curtis Schleibaum said he is excited about the opportunities the school's new Project Lead the Way lab will provide to students.

The two lab rooms, featuring 35 state-of-the-art computer workstations and other technology was funded through grant money the county received from the EcO15 initiative, which also has helped expand the program to Brownstown Central High School and Trinity Lutheran High School this year.

“It wouldn’t have happened without EcO15,” Schleibaum said.

EcO15 is funded through the Lilly Endowment and focuses on improving the manufacturing, tourism and hospitality fields in Jackson and surrounding counties.

Other county schools, including Crothersville Junior-Senior High School, Medora Junior-Senior High School and Brownstown Central Middle School, are working on implementing the Project Lead the Way curriculum as well.

Seymour High School already has an award-winning program in place, which many other schools across the state and country are using as a model when starting their own.

Schleibaum said the middle school program will only enhance the high school’s offerings.

“It aligns with the high school curriculum so for the first time the middle school and high school are on the same page,” he said.

“The technology and programs students are working with are the same thing that a lot of their parents are using in the factories,” Schleibaum told visitors during their tour. “Getting the technology in their hands is the first step to making them technology literate.”

Not only do students learn how to design and make projects on the computers, but they also get to build them.

“They need hands-on experience with tools, not just the computers,” Schleibaum said.

By having all students take the introductory classes, Schleibaum said he hopes they get an idea of “what it means to be an engineer.”

“There are so many avenues you can take with engineering and a lot of these students don’t know that,” he said.

“This is an opportunity for them to see what it is about. That way they aren’t judging the book before they open the cover.”

Steve Corona of Job Works out of Fort Wayne said the program is instrumental in helping prepare and educate tomorrow's work force.

"I think it's phenomenal," he said. "Early exposure to manufacturing and technology helps them to understand there are good-paying jobs in this community and if they use their time wisely now, they will be ready for those jobs. It's going to encourage a whole new group of students."

A larger skilled work force is attractive to businesses and industries looking to expand or relocate or for new companies to locate, he added.

"If I'm a businessman, I want to go to a community like Seymour that has got a supply of talented labor," he said.

Corona said the program is money well spent

"It's a good use of the funds because it's best to start with your people," he said.

Baughman said she likes being part of Project Lead the Way because it's so much more interesting than learning from a textbook.

"You get to try different things and you have the freedom to make changes to your project so it's what you want it to be," she said.

So far, the response to Project Lead the Way at the middle school has been better than Schleibaum could have imagined.

"Class has run over and none of the students even noticed," he said. "That's how engaged they are."